2

"Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?"

(Job 1–2, 28)

Walter Moberly
University of Durham

1: The Nature of Wisdom

One of the prime categories of the Old Testament, and of the faiths rooted in it, is wisdom. Scholarly work often approaches wisdom as a phenomenon characteristic of certain books in the Old Testament—"wisdom literature." My concern here, however, is with the nature of wisdom as an existential reality: what might it mean and look like to be wise?[1]

Solomon is the Old Testament figure with most historic resonances in relation to wisdom. However, I want to argue here that the figure of Job valuably illustrates one primary dimension of wisdom. My argument will focus on two excerpts from the book of Job, which, taken together, offer a striking account of wisdom—an account which is a contribution to the larger study of the book of Job as a whole, but which is also meaningful in its own right. (The juxtaposition of this essay with that of Susannah Ticciati in certain ways replicates the dynamics of the biblical book, in which the portrayal of Job in differing modes in narrative and dialogue respectively is never explained, although both are to be held together and taken seriously. In general terms, it is surely the case that the integrity and trust displayed by Job in the narrative is a presupposition for his passionate speeches subsequently.)

1. This essay is an abbreviated version of a fuller discussion of Job 1–2, 28 in Moberly, *Old Testament*, and is used with permission.

The approach will be a close reading that takes the world of the text with full imaginative seriousness, so as to hear its voice and consider its implications for spiritual life today. Among other issues, we will consider what it is that makes goodness attractive, since piety is often considered to make for a dull life, and when it is a mark of wisdom to refuse to try to rationalize affliction and tragedy.

2: A Reading of Job 1:1—2:10[2]

> 1 There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

This initial depiction of Job, in which he has four strongly positive characteristics—blameless; upright; feared God; turned from evil—is the most glowing and positive character depiction in the whole Old Testament. The most closely comparable figure in this regard is Noah, though arguably his depiction is slightly less glowing: "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God" (Gen 6:9). Particularly important among Job's qualities is the fact that he is "one who fears God" (*yĕrē' ĕlōhîm*), which is the prime term in the Old Testament for appropriate human response to God.

Given that Job is an outstanding example of right response to God, it is the more striking that he is from Uz. Wherever Uz might be located on a map, Uz is not Israel. That is, Job is not an Israelite, but someone who stands outside the chosen people. What difference does this make? In general terms, it is a reminder that true relationship with God is not restricted to the household of faith. In terms of the specifics of this narrative, the point is most likely that the dynamics of Job's story are not dependent upon the particularities of YHWH's dealings with Israel (election, covenant, *torah*, etc.) but represent that which is true or possible for the human condition as such.

Thus Job, though not an Israelite, is an exceptional human being, whose exceptional qualities are rooted in his relationship with God.

> 2 There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. 3 He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east.

2. I cite the NRSV throughout.

Job is fabulously well-off, in terms both of his family and his possessions. Since the groupings of numbers for both family and possessions all add up to ten (seven and three; five and five), they are presumably symbolic large numbers. Although large quantities of livestock in an apparently pastoral context may not say much to the imagination of many a modern urban/suburban reader, the point in context—that Job is exceptionally wealthy—could easily be rendered in comparable contemporary categories (mansions, yachts, airplanes, offshore bank accounts, stock holdings . . .). Job enjoys the kind of prosperity about which most people can only dream.

Thus far we have been told two things about Job: that he is exceptional in piety/integrity, and that he is exceptional in prosperity. What we have not been told is the possible relationship between these; and it can often be an important principle of narrative interpretation to attend to what is not said as well as to what is said. The narrator has juxtaposed two facts about Job, and has left them uninterpreted, in silence. Such a silence, a "gap" in narratival terms, remains open to be filled; and this will be crucial to the story as it develops.

> 4 His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5 And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." This is what Job always did.

This fuller account of Job's family probably serves two purposes. One is to underline the delightful and enviable nature of Job's family, with its regular celebrations where all are included (v. 4). The other is to underline Job's piety, inasmuch as, in this pastoral/patriarchal context where there is apparently neither temple nor priesthood (as also in Gen 12–50), Job appropriately acts as a priest, in a way that brings together his concern for God with his concern for his family (v. 5). Although some modern interpreters have difficulty with such a portrayal of Job—on the grounds that it looks like neurosis and obsession rather than healthy piety—this is almost certainly to read against the grain of the text because of inhabiting a different frame of reference. The narrative's own concern is to portray the exemplary quality of all that Job has and does.

> 6 One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan [or *the Accuser*; Heb *haśśāṭān*] also came among them. 7 The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to

> and from on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." 8 The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil."

The scene shifts abruptly and dramatically, from earth to "heaven." Here a dialogue takes place that is determinative for the whole story.

First, we must clarify the identity of YHWH's interlocutor. Here the NRSV rendering "Satan" is seriously misleading,[3] because it implies that this is a proper name, and consequently encourages readers to suppose that here we have Satan who is the devil. This is wrong because of a simple rule of Hebrew grammar: proper/personal names never take the definite article. Yet here, as the NRSV marginal note reveals, we have the definite article (*ha-*) before the Hebrew word *śāṭān*. So the Hebrew *haśśāṭān* designates not a name but a function or role: "the Adversary/Opponent." In other words, the heavenly being here is not Satan, the figure in much subsequent Jewish and Christian theology, but an otherwise unknown member of the heavenly court about whom we know only what we are told here: he gets around on earth so as to be familiar with its inhabitants (vv. 7, 8a), and (as we will see) asks awkward questions.[4]

YHWH, having initially established that the satan has been carrying out his regular function of familiarizing himself with what is happening on earth, then rhetorically commends Job as an exemplary person, of whom the satan should be well aware. YHWH uses the same terminology as that with which the narrator initially introduced Job, and underlines the truly exceptional nature of Job's piety ("none like him on the earth"). YHWH holds up Job as a model not just for consideration but also implicitly for emulation. Although, within the constraints of the scenario depicted, the implication about emulation is addressed to the satan, in all likelihood it is intended for those overhearing the conversation, that is the reader/hearer of the story. Job is being commended *to us* as an exemplary human being, worthy of imitation.

> 9 Then the satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing [*ḥinnām*]? 10 Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land."

3. This occurs also in some other modern translations, e.g., NIV, ESV, perhaps out of undue deference to the KJV and certain traditional readings of the text.

4. Henceforth I will replace "Satan" with "the satan" in citations of the NRSV.

Despite YHWH's commendation, the satan is not impressed; or, more precisely, he is suspicious. His suspicion is directed towards what we were told in the opening three verses. From Job's four commended qualities the satan naturally focuses on the weightiest of them, his "fear of God," and puts his question with regard to it: the satan fixes on the silence about the relationship between Job's outstanding piety and his outstanding prosperity. Where the narrator was silent, the satan is suspicious. He does not deny that, in a real sense, Job fears God; but he wonders about what is going on under the surface, what is Job's motivation. Although it is possible that there is no relationship between Job's piety and his prosperity (it just happens that both are the case), it is also possible to read the narrator's silence as implying that Job's prosperity is a *consequence* of his piety (YHWH blesses Job *because* he is faithful). However, the satan asks whether the real relationship is not in fact that of *purpose* (Job is faithful *so that* YHWH will bless him). Job's piety, though formally directed towards God, is at heart directed to what Job receives from God. Indeed, he does so well out of his piety that his piety is hardly surprising—rather, he would presumably be foolish not to fear God, given the extensive protection and prosperity he receives from God. In short, Job's in it for what he gets out of it.

One could reframe the satan's suspicion by saying that he is suggesting that Job is the religious equivalent of someone who marries for money. Whatever the declarations of love, and whatever the apparently loving gestures and actions, the insidious purpose of it all is not to love but to *exploit* someone—to proclaim love for the person, yet in reality to be in love with their possessions. Although to love is to be self-giving towards another, this is a matter of being self-seeking, of using someone else as a means to one's own ends. Such self-seeking is the more reprehensible when it is disguised by language and actions that purport to be its opposite. But is this in fact the reality of Job?

How should this suspicious question be heard? What is its tone and tenor? Robert Alter, for example, remarks that "the dialogue suggests . . . an element of jealousy (when God lavishes praise on Job) and cynical mean-spiritedness."[5] Certainly the question can be taken this way. But need it be? After all, is it not legitimate to want to know if a person is really what he appears to be? Especially when someone is held up as exemplary, is it not appropriate to seek assurance that this person is genuine? To raise such a question may not leave the questioner sounding "nice," but that is beside the point.

In this context, it is worth recollecting the former practice of the Roman Catholic Church with regard to the procedures for the canonization

5. Alter, *Wisdom Books*, 12.

of saints. The Vatican used to employ someone who, with nice irony, was entitled "the devil's advocate," whose role was to ask hard questions of someone proposed for sainthood. To recognize someone as a saint means, among other things, that their life is held up as exemplary, a trustworthy model for the faithful to emulate, whose name they can take for their children, and so on. The role of the devil's advocate was "quality control." For, should the Church proceed hastily and proclaim someone to be a saint without first checking carefully, it is possible that an investigative reporter could then do some homework and discover, say, Mafia links, money laundering, and a mistress, and the resultant publication of the findings would bring shame, confusion, and turmoil to the Church that had precipitately declared a plausible crook to be a saint. The devil's advocate had to do the investigating, and establish whether or not there were hitherto-unknown difficulties in the life of the proposed saint; if there was dirt to dig, it was his responsibility to dig it. Interestingly, the role of devil's advocate was abolished by Pope John Paul II, precisely to try to speed up the process of canonization, which traditionally was notoriously slow, not least because of the devil's advocate (though the politics of canonization could, and still can, be complex). He wanted to have more saints whose lives were still known in living memory, saints who could serve as, among other things, contemporary role models to commend the faith. It may be that these revised procedures will work well, and that the old ones were unduly cumbersome. Nonetheless, the concern represented by the devil's advocate remains a valid one: the greater the claim made on behalf of someone, the greater the importance of rigorous validation of the grounds for the claim.

If, as I have suggested, YHWH's commendation of Job to the satan as exemplary is implicitly a commendation to the audience of the book, then the audience in every generation can recognize their own legitimate concern being voiced by the satan: Is this apparently exemplary person really what she or he appears to be? If Job is being commended as, as it were, a "saint" even while he is still alive, then can this commendation withstand rigorous validation?

Once the suspicion is voiced—that Job's apparently exemplary fear of God may in reality be a self-seeking using of God—how best can it be dealt with? It is clear that mere reaffirmation of the initial commendation would get nowhere, as it would not take seriously the nature of the objection raised; it could lead to a fruitless "Yes, he does," "No, he doesn't." A different way of handling the issue is needed, if progress is to be made: Job must be tested.

> 11 "But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has,
> and he will curse you to your face." 12 The LORD said to the

> satan, "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!" So the satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

If the suspicion is that "he's in it for what he gets out of it," then the only sure test is to remove "what he gets out of it" and then see whether or not he remains "in it." If Job is deprived of the protection and blessing of God, will he retain his fear of God or not? The satan expresses his expectation in the negative: Job's piety will turn into profanity. And since there is no way of YHWH's genuinely showing that his commendation of Job is right other than by acceding to the proposed stripping from Job of all that he has, the testing sequence of events to follow is set in train without more ado—other than that, since the suspicion has been expressed with regard to all Job has, as enumerated in verses 2–3, it is to these alone, and not Job's person, that what happens next must be directed.

> 13 One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother's house, 14 a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were ploughing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, 15 and the Sabaeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." 16 While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you." 17 While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." 18 While he was still speaking, another came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, 19 and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you." 20 Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground . . .

In a stylized and somewhat breathless sequence Job loses everything. To be precise, everything and everyone specified in verses 2–3 is either killed or carried off by others (apart from the four who escaped to tell Job!). That which Job had got "out of" God is gone—so will he remain "into" God? The moment of truth has come. Job initially responds with the common actions of grief in response to death and disaster. He embarks on presumably time-honored rituals of mourning, in such a way that the next thing we expect is to hear him

speak, presumably to utter a lament of some kind or other in which he will bewail his situation—a lament that could easily degenerate into cursing.

> . . . and [he] worshipped. 21 He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." 22 In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

Job speaks memorable words of creaturely acceptance of finitude and loss. He ignores the human agents of his disaster and focuses instead on God, whose sovereign will he affirms, and whose name he blesses. Indeed, although he is not an Israelite, at this key moment he uses language characteristic of Israel's praise of God (the wording of Ps 113:2a, "blessed be the name of the Lord," is identical to Job's wording in verse 21b). He even, uniquely in the book, names God as Israel knows God, YHWH, a name that otherwise is reserved to the narrator. Perhaps Job's usage underlines the congruence of his knowledge of God as here displayed with Israel's knowledge of God.[6]

In other words, because Job blesses and does not curse, he defies the satan's suspicion and proves it to be unfounded. His fear of God is shown to be a genuine fear *of God*, and not disguised self-seeking. He has passed the test with flying colors.

Or has he?

> 2:1 One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and the satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. 2 The LORD said to the satan, "Where have you come from?" The satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." 3 The LORD said to the satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil . . ."

Thus far the scenario and the wording (with two minor and insignificant variations in the Hebrew) are identical to the previous occasion.

> ". . . He still persists in his integrity [*tummātô*], although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason [*ḥinnām*]."

6. The narrator's note in verse 22 in one sense states the obvious and would not be needed in the context of this narrative alone. It has presumably been included because of what Job says later in the book, and Job's possible reputation as someone who does, more or less, charge God with wrongdoing—as, notably, in his speeches in Job 21 and 24. Thus the narrator is clarifying that, even if some of what Job says later may be open to question in certain ways, no such reservation applies at this point in the book.

YHWH continues to commend Job to the satan as exemplary, and now includes reference to what has taken place since first they spoke, in effect commenting on Job's demeanor and words in 1:20–21. He changes the leading category for depicting Job from his "fear" to his "integrity," where the Hebrew noun for "integrity" (*tummâ*) is formed from the same root as the adjective "blameless" (*tām*) that has been repeatedly used to describe Job (1:1, 8; 2:3); so one might render it "blamelessness" to keep the verbal continuity, though "integrity" better captures the sense in English. But the point is unchanged: Job continues to display those qualities for which he has been commended as exemplary, despite their not "benefitting" him.

Moreover, YHWH depicts what has happened to Job with the same term with which the satan articulated his suspicion of Job: "for no reason/for nothing" (*ḥinnām*). The point is not that there was no reason at all for what happened to Job—for the concern to test was explicit—but that there was nothing deficient in Job himself or in his relationship with YHWH that gave rise to what happened. The fact that Job really does fear God "for nothing," as has become apparent, underlines that what happened to him in some sense corresponds to this— the rightness of his disinterested ("for nothing") relationship with God is shown in the unrelatedness to his way of living of what has happened to him ("for no reason").

> 4 Then the satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that
> people have they will give to save their lives. 5 But stretch out
> your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will
> curse you to your face."

The satan, however, is unpersuaded, and that for a simple reason. The terms of the previous test related only to all that Job had (1:2–3) and explicitly excluded his own person (1:12). But this exclusion allows the suspicion to be expressed again in severer form. Job is not only self-seeking, but he is nasty, indeed ruthless, about it: he will sacrifice anyone and anything in the cause of self-preservation. What does he ultimately care if his family, servants, and livestock perish as long as he himself is preserved unscathed? The initial test was not sufficiently searching and therefore must be renewed so as to include Job himself. He must experience devastation and desolation in his own person. When this happens, and Job's piety no longer results in his personal well-being, then at last the true nature of Job as indeed unscrupulously self-seeking in relation to God will be revealed. This time, his piety really will turn to profanity.

Whether or not the satan's suspicion is a "fair" response to Job's words and deeds so far is beside the point. It is the fact that it remains a *possible*

construal of what is going on that is all-important. So something further must happen to Job that will lead him to reveal and express his inner reality.

> 6 The LORD said to the satan, "Very well, he is in your power;
> only spare his life." 7 So the satan went out from the presence of
> the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole
> of his foot to the crown of his head. 8 Job took a potsherd with
> which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

The terms of the further test dictate themselves. Job's life must be deprived of all that makes it worthwhile, and become deathlike; but he must remain alive. This necessary reservation is not, as in the first test, restricting the scope of the test, but is simply so that Job remains able to respond to his situation. So he is afflicted in the kind of way that is agonizing and makes him an object of disgust to himself as much as to others; and the point of these loathsome sores covering him from bottom to top is that *all of him* is afflicted with no part left as some kind of comfort zone, where he might still feel all right. His consequent sitting among ashes—ashes being the useless and unlovely remnants of that which once was living and/or had shape and purpose but is now located at the rubbish tip—is an eloquent symbol of his new situation.

> 9 Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity
> [*tummâ*]? Curse God, and die." 10 But he said to her, "You speak
> as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at
> the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" In all this Job did not
> sin with his lips.

Job's wife now articulates in her own way the issue at the heart of the satan's suspicion. What is the point of integrity, if this is what integrity leads to? Once you see that nothing good comes of it, why bother with it? So be done with it: give up on God, say what you must surely now think about him, and perhaps thereby hasten the end which is now welcome and which must surely be coming soon anyway.

Job's response (again differentiated in a subsequent aside from his later poetic speeches) is simple and clear. After reproving his wife for speaking "foolishly," presumably because of her assumption about the "point" of integrity, he articulates his own understanding of his integrity/fear of God. In essence, it is no good being a fairweather friend; true relationship is sustained through the hard times as well as the good times. Indeed, if one reflects on all that Job has been through, then it is appropriate to depict his relationship with God in time-honored and hallowed language: "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness, and in health," for these marriage vows both describe and constitute true relationship. Job's integrity/

fear of God has the dynamics of true love. It thereby becomes fully clear that the content of "fear of God" is far from being "frightened of God lest God do something unpleasant," for the worst that could happen to Job has happened, and he sustains his fear of God regardless. In terms of the narrative, it is as final a refutation as there could be of the suspicion that Job was self-seeking, that his piety was merely instrumental, or that he did not relate to God for God's own sake.

3: A Reading of Job 28:1–28

We turn now to a famous and beautiful poem, located later in the book towards the end of the speeches of Job and his friends. It is here that the question, "Where shall wisdom be found?" is explicitly raised.

One introductory clarification: Whose voice is speaking in this poem? My proposal is that the voice in the poem is that of the narrator whom we have already heard in 1:1—2:10.

1 Surely there is a mine for silver,[7]
and a place for gold to be refined.
2 Iron is taken out of the earth,
and copper is smelted from ore.
3 Miners put an end to darkness,
and search out to the farthest bound
the ore in gloom and deep darkness.
4 They open shafts in a valley away from human habitation;
they are forgotten by travellers,
they sway suspended, remote from people.
5 As for the earth, out of it comes bread;
but underneath it is turned up as by fire.
6 Its stones are the places of sapphires,
and its dust contains gold.
7 That path no bird of prey knows,
and the falcon's eye has not seen it.
8 The proud wild animals have not trodden it;
the lion has not passed over it.
9 They put their hand to the flinty rock,
and overturn mountains by the roots.
10 They cut channels in the rocks,

7. NRSV prefaces this line, as it prefaces the start of each paragraph of the poem, with an inverted comma, which indicates that the poem is being construed as on the lips of Job. Since I am taking the poem to be a contribution by the narrator, and not a speech, I omit the inverted commas throughout.

and their eyes see every precious thing.
11 The sources of the rivers they probe;
hidden things they bring to light.

The poem begins with an elaborate account of human ability to discover that which is widely held to be supremely precious: silver and gold. Human ingenuity is represented by mining underground in remote and difficult locations where precious stones of many different kinds (iron and sapphires as well as silver and gold) can be found (vv. 1–6). To penetrate underground means that humans can get to places inaccessible to birds and beasts, who are restricted to what is above ground (vv. 7–8). Humans who delve for precious metals are not only bold in undertaking (v. 9b) but also successful in execution—they see, they bring to light (vv. 10, 11). Human ingenuity and ability is wonderful.

Yet it is precisely this wondrous resourcefulness that poses the issue of the poem:

12 But where shall wisdom be found?
And where is the place of understanding?
13 Mortals do not know the way to it,
and it is not found in the land of the living.
14 The deep says, "It is not in me,"
and the sea says, "It is not with me."

The ability to discover precious stones does not suffice to discover that quality which, by clear implication, is even more precious than such precious stones: wisdom. This cannot be found in the way that humans find other things (v. 13). Even if they delved under sea rather than under land, it would make no difference—wisdom is no more in the one place than the other (v. 14). In the places and by the means whereby they discover and get hold of other things, humans cannot get hold of wisdom.

15 It cannot be bought for gold,
and silver cannot be weighed out as its price.
16 It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir,
in precious onyx or sapphire.
17 Gold and glass cannot equal it,
nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold.
18 No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal;
the price of wisdom is above pearls.
19 The chrysolite of Ethiopia cannot compare with it,
nor can it be valued in pure gold.

The thought changes from the possibility of discovering wisdom to that of buying it. If ingenuity fails, might wealth, especially exceptional wealth, succeed? Might the precious stones dug out from the earth be used to acquire wisdom? To which the answer—in a series of elegant variations on precious materials the precise identity of which is not always clear, but which unfailingly represent high value—is simply no. Wisdom is indeed supremely valuable, but its value is incommensurate with financial value. Wisdom cannot be bought; it is not that kind of thing.

> 20 Where then does wisdom come from?
> And where is the place of understanding?
> 21 It is hidden from the eyes of all living,
> and concealed from the birds of the air.
> 22 Abaddon and Death say,
> "We have heard a rumor of it with our ears."

And so the poet repeats, with variation, the refrain of verses 12–14. If one cannot get wisdom by the prime means that humans use to acquire things—ingenuity, discovery, wealth—then where on earth is it to be found? To which the answer is: nowhere on earth. Those on the earth, above the earth, or below the earth alike agree that it is not there.

But where then is wisdom?

> 23 God understands the way to it,
> and he knows its place.
> 24 For he looks to the ends of the earth,
> and sees everything under the heavens.
> 25 When he gave to the wind its weight,
> and apportioned out the waters by measure;
> 26 when he made a decree for the rain,
> and a way for the thunderbolt;
> 27 then he saw it and declared it;
> he established it, and searched it out.
> 28 And he said to humankind [*'ādām*],
> "Truly, the fear of the Lord [*yir'at 'ădōnay*], that is wisdom;
> and to depart from evil [*sûr mērā'*] is understanding."

That which is beyond humans is not beyond God. Where wisdom is, and how to get there, is known to God (v. 23); and God is able to see what no one else can (v. 24; contrast vv. 13, 21). When at creation he regulated wind and rain (vv. 25–26), then he established what wisdom is and where it is to be found (v. 27). God, however, did not keep this knowledge of wisdom to himself, but rather declared it to his human creation (*'ādām*), to those who would have the capacity to understand it and for whom it would be of

fundamental importance. The content of this primordial revelation is that wisdom and understanding is in fact constituted by the fear of the Lord and departing from evil (v. 28).

These key terms that define wisdom are, however, precisely those qualities which have been seen to characterize Job in the opening narrative. Not only did the narrative introduce Job as "one who feared God [*yĕrē' ĕlōhîm*] and departed from evil [*sār mērā'*],"[8] but the narrative probed the meaning of this "fear" and showed that it means true relationship with God, a relationship to be sustained even when the worst that could happen does happen. If the opening narrative establishes a meaning for "fear of God," and the poem of chapter 28 identifies such "fear of God" with "wisdom," then Job in the narrative exemplifies that of which the poem speaks. Job's unswerving adherence to God in the midst of disaster and desolation represents true wisdom and understanding. If, then, we, the readers/hearers, want to know what wisdom looks like, we should look at Job—and, in principle, emulate him.

Why then does the poem so stress the inaccessibility of wisdom? This is surely in part because, in an important sense, wisdom is like God himself. On the one hand, God is impossible to find within the world—in a postbiblical formulation, "God is not an item in an inventory of the universe," for anything thus discovered would by definition be a creature rather than the Creator. Nor is God accessible by those means with which humans regularly attain their goals (ingenuity, hard work, wealth). On the other hand, it is the common testimony of countless people down the ages that God is accessible both here and now. The way God is "accessed" is different in kind from the way that things that humans commonly value are accessed; so too wisdom.

This general point receives specific focus in the context of Job: How should one live, when life itself falls apart? When things go wrong, it is common either to rationalize or to resent, or to do both. Job does neither. Although we the readers/hearers know the rationale for what Job goes through, he does not when he makes his responses in 1:21 and 2:10, nor

8. The wording of "depart from evil" is identical in 1:1, 8, 2:3, and 28:28, except that in the former context *sār* is a participle, appropriate to the narrative description, while in the latter *sûr* is an infinitive, appropriate to a definitional use. More surprising is that 28:28 uses "Lord" (*'ădōnay*) rather than "God" *ĕlōhîm*, when the use of "God" would be expected, because of "God" in both immediate (28:23) and more distant (1:1, 8; 2:3) context. Although some manuscripts have *yhwh* instead of *'ădōnay*, none have the expected (*ĕlōhîm*). I see no good explanation for this (the suggestion that verse 28 may be an addition resolves nothing, for one could expect someone to make the wording of the addition appropriate to its new context), although of course the present wording appropriately emphasizes the intrinsic lordship of God over his creation. The LXX irons this out by using *theosebeia* in 28:28, which lines up perfectly with the adjective *theosebēs* in 1:1, 8; 2:3.

does he ever; and Job does not resent, but rather maintains his stance of trust in God (which then becomes the premise for his passionate questioning). So where is wisdom in a world in which there are incomprehensible tragedies and disasters? It is found in "fearing God and turning away from evil," in maintaining integrity and trust towards God even *in extremis*. This is both hopelessly hard and elusive (as evidenced by the many down the ages who have responded otherwise) and entirely possible (as evidenced by the many down the ages who have displayed Job-like qualities).

One corollary of this construal is surely that the poem is using "wisdom" in a specific sense, appropriate to the concern of the book—knowing how to live well in extreme situations. "Wisdom" as defined here is not the ability to utilize knowledge in such a way as to live well in general, which is the consistent concern in Proverbs. Hence a difference of formulation. In Proverbs "the fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom" (9:10; cf. 1:7; 15:33), which most likely means that "fear of YHWH" constitutes access to the high road by which wisdom is attained, has a didactic import appropriate to the young person whose life is being shaped: first learn to live in the fear of God, and thereby you will be enabled to live wisely. In Job 28 wisdom is *equated with* "fear of the Lord," rather than being the result of it, because it is a construal of Job's fear of God, maintained in extreme adversity, as being the wise way to respond to apparently random affliction.

4: Concluding Reflections

By way of conclusion I will reflect a little on the way in which the understanding and possible appropriation of the substantive content of the biblical text relates to how one reads it.

One of the keys to my reading has been attentiveness to literary context, the relationship between the fear of God that Job displays in the opening narrative and the fear of God that is defined as wisdom. Many interpreters either do not notice the linkage or leave its interpretive potential more or less unexploited. Yet even a recognition of its substantive significance does not necessarily lead to the reading offered here. David Robertson, who thinks that attempts to read Job in its received form are generative of irony, comments on 28:28: "This is precisely the wisdom Job has followed all his life (chs. 1–2) and where has it got him: the ash-heap. Some wisdom!"[9] Comparably, David Clines comments: "It is hard not to see the relation between these sentences [28:28 and 1:1] as ironic. If fearing God and turning aside from evil is what

9. Robertson, *Literary Critic*, 33–34, 46.

has got Job into this unhappy condition (and that is the thrust of the prologue), the value of this prescription for life is seriously undermined."[10]

These seem to me instructive examples of non-attuned readings, which in effect score a point at the expense of taking the text seriously.[11] On the one hand, the thrust of the prologue is *not* that Job's fear of God and turning from evil got him into misery. To be sure, had he not had these qualities there could have been no question of testing their authenticity. But had there been no test, there would have been no misery. His qualities as such were not the problem, and there is no implication whatever in the text that fear of God in itself engenders an "unhappy condition."

On the other hand, the implicit assumptions in the way that Robertson and Clines formulate their critiques are surely open to question. To be sure, there is indeed a clear "prescription for life" in Job's fear of God and its construal as wisdom. Or, to put it differently, despite the narrative's rejection of the suspicion that Job's piety may be essentially instrumental in relation to God, there are various ways in which piety may have consequences that need not be problematic; the proposition that to live with faith and integrity should lead to a good life, and that that is a legitimate reason for living with faith and integrity, should be uncontroversial, at least for any (would-be) believer—although of course the notion of a "good life" needs considerable discussion as to what it does, and does not, mean. The problem arises if one construes faith and integrity in instrumental terms, such that if they do not lead to the attainment of a "good life" then it is pointless to maintain them. It is the difference between faith and integrity having intrinsic value with an expectation of certain consequences, and their having solely or predominantly instrumental value. It is suspicion that the latter may be the case that prompts the satan to speak up.

To generalize the issue somewhat, the priorities that are surely present within the Job texts we have looked at are shared widely within the biblical canon. Elsewhere within the Old Testament Habakkuk famously depicts the righteous person, in a context of affliction and puzzlement and scorn, living by "faithfulness" (*ĕmûnā*), and ends with a personal testimony of comparable faithfulness in time of overwhelming disaster (Hab 2:4; 3:17–19). Within the book of Isaiah, an unnamed voice asks a searching question about how people are to respond to the servant of YHWH, whose repeated afflictions have just been recounted (Isa 50:4–9, 10):

10. Clines, "Job 28:28," 84.

11. Contemporary biblical scholarship affords all-too-regular occasion to ponder the sentiment succinctly expressed by Robert Alter: "the language of criticism now often reflects an emotional alienation from the imaginative life of the text under discussion." Alter, *Pleasures of Reading*, 15.

> Who among you fears the LORD
> and obeys the voice of his servant,
> who walks in darkness
> and has no light,
> yet trusts in the name of the LORD
> and relies upon his God?

Within the New Testament it is supremely Jesus in his passion who displays comparable qualities. Whatever his own hopes and preferences, his bottom line is to be faithful to his Father: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want" (Matt 26:39). Just as Jesus is not swayed by the thought that "if being Son of God does not make your life obviously better or easier for you, then what is the point of it?" nor should (would-be) believers be swayed either.

If I may venture a summary generalization, my reading of the literature on Job 1–2 and 28 has left me with a sense that the interpretive thesis for which I am arguing here—that the maintenance of faith and integrity *in extremis* is wisdom—gets little, if any, hearing for one reason above all others: it is considered dull, shallow, simplistic, boring. It represents "conventional piety," and (by implication) the conventionally pious lead predictably dull and intellectually unstimulating lives, all of which is (by implication) generative of no more than boredom or perhaps suspicion[12]—how different from the Job of the speeches who is interesting precisely because he abandons the conventions of piety and speaks with unrestrained passion. To be sure, piety can be dull. But need it be so? As Michael Gorman pointed out in discussion of this essay, people who bear great hardship with faithful patience and courage are deeply admirable if one has the privilege, often a humbling privilege, of knowing them in the flesh.

So perhaps the issue is to some extent the age-old problem of how to make goodness appear *imaginatively* interesting, when encountered not in the flesh but in a story or picture. In medieval murals of heaven and hell, for example, the angels and saints regularly seem less interesting than the demons and the damned. In many a classic novel, such as those of Dickens, the dubious characters and villains (Scrooge, Fagin, Wackford Squeers) are usually more memorable than the heroes. Contemporary film goes much the same way; for example, in Peter Jackson's big-screen rendering

12. David Penchansky comments that the "legendary Job" (i.e., the Job of the narrative, who is commended by 28:28) functions to "confirm the easy piety of the superficially religious, reaffirming the control of the religious establishment." Penchansky, *Betrayal of God*, 32.

of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* the elves, who epitomize patience and wisdom, are duller than the orcs, who epitomize violence.[13]

But the problem is also surely to some degree one of perspective—the extent and nature of one's own comfort or affliction may make a marked difference to one's evaluations of moral and spiritual stability in both self and others. In all fundamental issues of life, how and where we stand affects how and what we see. Part of the challenge of the Job material that we have considered is to learn when life may be going well, and Job's situation may seem remote, how best to respond if life goes badly.

13. It is interesting to compare Jackson's construal with Tolkien's original. In Jackson's rendering Frodo for a while loses trust in Sam, Aragorn displays self-doubt, Faramir wavers, and Elrond inclines to despair of Middle-Earth and pressures Arwen to break faith with Aragorn, which for a while she goes along with. In Tolkien's own portrayal Frodo, Aragorn, Faramir, Elrond, and Arwen display unwavering integrity and resolve to resist faithlessness and to oppose Sauron to the end, come what may, and, because of Tolkien's imaginative genius, this is consistently engaging. Jackson, however, presumably considered this potentially unappealing and decided that the story would be more interesting cinematically if its main characters were less consistent.